

"I WAS GONE ON DEBATING": MALCOLM X'S PRISON DEBATES AND PUBLIC CONFRONTATIONS

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More than any other African American leader of his era, Malcolm X used public debates to confront whites, advance and defend his own views, and challenge competing civil rights organizations, representatives and tactics. Between March 1960 and December 1964, he engaged in more than twenty formal debates and participated in numerous panels and interviews in which he was pitted against his fellow panelists (and frequently the moderator as well).¹ Even Malcolm X's individual speech appearances, which were often oppositional in character and quite specific in their refutation of claims and positions advanced by others, may best be viewed as moments in a larger debate involving non-proximate adversaries (Branham, 1994, p. 2).

Malcolm X was a brilliant debater, adept at dismantling the positions of his opponents, converting their arguments to his

own advantage and, most importantly, casting the issues of dispute in utter and compelling clarity. He effectively challenged assumptions regarding goals and tactics of the struggle for human rights that had been taken for granted by many of his opponents and listeners. "Within a few years" of his introduction to debate in Norfolk Prison Colony, writes George Breitman, "he was to become the most respected debater in the country, taking on one and all—politicians, college professors, journalists, anyone—black or white, bold enough to meet him" (1965, p. 5). Yet despite their importance to his public advocacy, the debates of Malcolm X have received little scholarly attention. Few of his debates were recorded or transcribed; fewer still have been published. Current anthologies of Malcolm X's speeches include no complete texts of his debates. No comprehensive listing of the dates, opponents and topics for his debates has previously been available. The blizzard of biographies and critical studies of Malcolm X that have appeared in the decades since his death has produced isolated anecdotes of his debates, but not a single sustained analysis of his debate career or the reasons for the extraordinary emphasis he placed upon debating in his public appeals.

For Malcolm X, debate was a unique and valuable form of public address. His use of debate was a deliberate rhetorical choice, through which he believed that his positions might be advanced most persuasively to the largest possible audience (Branham, 1995). He confronted highly educated and sometimes nationally recog-

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¹ In February 1962, for example, Malcolm X disputed claims by Irv Kupcinet, moderator of the popular Chicago television panel show, *At Random*. Asked by Kupcinet to name a "Negro leader" publicly associated with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X pressed Kupcinet to "name a single so-called Negro leader" not selected to lead Negroes by the white man. "After much stammering," according to an account in *The New Crusader*, Kupcinet named Jackie Robinson and Roy Wilkins. When Malcolm X replied that Robinson had been picked by a white man to integrate baseball and that Wilkins was executive secretary of an organization (the NAACP) that had not had a black president in its 53-year history, he was forced to leave the show (Burley, 20).

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nized adversaries in a format that accorded him relatively equal standing and some assurance that his views would receive consideration and response. Occurring in a period of apparent consensus on the means and ends of the civil rights movement, the public debates of Malcolm X effectively shattered the myth of Black unanimity and enacted the confrontation and resistance that formed the basis of his appeal.

Malcolm X's extraordinary career as a public debater and orator, as well as his public advocacy for the Nation of Islam, began in the debating program of the Norfolk Prison Colony in Massachusetts. In this essay I will first examine the evolution and philosophy of the prison debate programs in which Malcolm X participated and offer an account of his experiences as a member of the internationally renowned Norfolk debating team. I will then discuss the importance of debate in Malcolm's X's later career as a public figure, providing a comprehensive record of his known debate appearances and an analysis of his methods and tactics. I will explore the rhetorical choice of debate as a preferred form of public address used by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam to convey their beliefs to disparate audiences.

DEBATE BEHIND BARS

Malcolm X's prison experience was never far from his thought or speech in later life. "The most important strand of experience in the fiber of Malcolm's life," writes Harry Flick, "was his imprisonment" (p. 22). Prison was the site of his religious conversion and self-education; it also shaped his understanding of power and oppression. "To understand a prison and the life of the interned, before and after his incarceration behind closed walls, is to understand how Malcolm came to

view and portray the black experience within a larger white milieu" (Flick, 1979, p. 23). Malcolm X's speeches, writings and debates are replete with references to imprisonment; all Black Americans, he argued, serve a life sentence in the maximum security ward of white oppression.

Because prison remained Malcolm X's operative metaphor for the environment in which he lived and spoke after his release, it is important to understand what it means to speak within a literal prison. In an environment of near-total control and regimentation, speech and debate activities are rare and significant acts of self-determination and resistance. In both prison and society at-large, Malcolm X invested great significance in the power of confrontational speech to enact personal and social transformation.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of Malcolm X's participation in prison debate is that such a program existed at all. Malcolm X's prison debating experience occurred during a relatively brief period in the history of American penology in which rehabilitation was widely accepted as the goal of imprisonment, prisoner education was viewed as the best means by which to promote rehabilitation, and training in speech and debate was understood to be fundamental to prisoner education.

All three views differed radically from the theories and practices that had previously dominated the penal system, and to which much of the penal system has since returned. For more than a century and a half, U.S. prisons operated on the principle that there should be no communication between prisoners (Reagen and Stoughton, 1976, pp. 4-5). This rule was enforced through solitary confinement or the "silent system," in which prisoners performed forced labor in each other's company, but were forbidden from speaking (Ackroyd, 1990, p. 377). The prisoner

locked in silence, wrote Charles Dickens in 1842, "is a man buried alive; to be dug out in the slow round of years; and in the meantime dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair" (pp. 100–101). The imposition of silence was designed partly to insulate inmates from the evil influences of their fellow prisoners. However, it was also part of a system of total control that strove to produce docile and obedient prisoners, submissive to the authority of prison officials. The suppression of speech limited self-expression. Regimentation and uniformity were the pervasive conditions of prison life (Friedman, 1993, p. 80).

The prison reform movement of the 1870s represented the first organized challenge to this model of prison administration and prisoner behavior. The First National Prison Congress, held in Cincinnati in 1870, recommended in its *Declaration of Principles* that "organized persuasion be made to take the place of coercive restraint, the object being to make upright and industrious freemen rather than orderly and obedient prisoners" (Grunhut, 1972, p. 91). But reform efforts to establish programs of prisoner education were opposed by those who feared that "educated criminals were more dangerous" (Chenault, 1951, p. 224). As late as the mid-1920s, fewer than 20% of U.S. prisons had any sort of school programs (Reagen and Stoughton, p. 42).

The reformers' view of the criminal as "an unfortunate victim of society," environmentally conditioned to crime, gained scientific and popular support during the 1920s and the Great Depression (Doering, 1940, p. vi). Learned behavior, it was reasoned, could be unlearned, and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, such as the abilities to speak and debate, might enable the former criminal to function legally and productively in society

upon release. Pioneer prison speech educator Chester Owens, whose direction of the debate program at New York's Woodbourne Institution began in 1938, insisted that "the acceptance of the invitation to 'Come, let us reason together' has shown itself, through debate, to be a vital part in the rehabilitation of inmates" (1939, p. 8). It was hoped that by experience in debating, prisoners would learn to express themselves and resolve disputes with words, rather than violence (Perry, 1991, p. 122).

Speech and debate activities were included in many proposals for prison reform. The influential German Prison School Order of 1924 recommended "discussions, debates and papers as means of directed self-instruction" (Grunhut, p. 233). In the United States, the 1933 report of the Englehardt Commission promoted prisoner re-socialization through "varied impressional and expressional activities," including the development of training and organizations for inmate speech and debate (Reagen and Stoughton, p. 43). By 1936, Sanford Bates, head of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, observed the sea-change in American penology regarding prisoners' speech: "The rule of silence does not prevail in the prisons of America today; The prisoner thinks and also speaks for himself" (p. 229).

Although strict silence was no longer enforced in most U.S. penal institutions in the twentieth century, organized speech and debate activities represented a rare opportunity for prisoners to communicate in the midst of "an environment where the flow of messages is severely restricted" (Corcoran, 1985, p. 53). Debate accorded some measure of power, standing, and expression in a system in which these otherwise were denied. For African American inmates, whose access to educational and speaking opportunities outside of

prison was restricted by segregation, prison debate programs from the 1930s through the 1950s provided training and fora for verbal engagement with white adversaries otherwise difficult to obtain.

It was in the extraordinary debating program of the Norfolk Prison Colony that Malcolm X gained the training and experience in public speaking that would have a profound influence on his later career. Although prison is inevitably a brutal experience of confinement and deprivation, Malcolm X's time in Norfolk was also for him a period of rebirth and resistance in which he began his preparations for a life of public advocacy. During his imprisonment at Charlestown, his half-sister Ella lobbied relentlessly for his transfer to Norfolk and finally succeeded in late 1948. Despite some recent characterizations of Norfolk as "a total failure," essentially no different from other prisons of its time (Rothman, 1980, p. 398), this was clearly not the opinion of Malcolm X and many other prisoners who came to Norfolk in that era from other penal institutions. Norfolk, he wrote in the *Autobiography*, "represented the most enlightened form of prison that I have ever heard of" (1965b, p. 157).

Opened in 1931, Norfolk Prison Colony embodied the radical critique of penology offered by Norfolk's first Superintendent, Howard B. Gill, who sought to create a physical and social environment that could counter the negative influences that had shaped the inmate's prior life. Guards were removed from regular contact with the prisoners. Instead of cell blocks, there were dormitories in which each inmate had a private room, left unlocked at night. Accommodations and food approximated "those of the average citizen" (Commons, 1933, p. vi). To prepare its prisoners to be productive citizens upon release, Norfolk was based on a "progressive stage system"

in which prisoners made transition from comprehensive behavioral control to greater degrees of liberty and "an appeal to self-control and a sense of responsibility" (Grunhut, p. 188). This sense of responsibility was encouraged through the creation of inmates' policy councils and educational programs, such as debating, that enhanced prisoners' skills and self-esteem and earned greater privileges for their participants (Serill, 1982, pp. 29-30).

Norfolk placed particular emphasis on prisoner education, including evening academic and vocational courses with instructors drawn from Harvard, Boston University, Emerson College and other nearby institutions. "Beyond these formal courses of education," writes Colony historian Thomas Yakhub, "the administration encouraged participation in debating clubs, lectures, and forums, and these drew a good audience most of the time." Colony officials were convinced that debate and discussion groups were an effective tool in prisoner rehabilitation. Although "it is difficult to evaluate their usefulness statistically," Yakhub concludes, "it cannot be doubted that these projects played an important part in helping to reorient the men" (Doering, p. 100).

Norfolk's prisoner debating program may have been the first in the United States. "A Debating Club has existed for some time under the supervision of a leader from the outside," according to the 1934 *Official Manual of the State Prison Colony*, "in which inmates themselves discuss various subjects upon which they have prepared themselves." A series of three public debates between prisoners living in the "Oval" and the "Inside," two housing complexes, were held in 1933 (p. 166). By the time of Malcolm Little's arrival at Norfolk in 1948, debates were held on a weekly basis, although few African American prisoners yet participated, according

to Rev. John Arthur Samuelson, the Protestant chaplain who coached the Norfolk debaters from October, 1948, to late 1951 (Gambino, 1993, n. 35, p. 28). Debates were conducted under the aegis of the Community Service Division of the Colony and the divisional Director himself served as monitor of the contests (Jarvis, 1993). Debate was firmly established as "an integral part of the rehabilitation program" at Norfolk and the program enjoyed an unusual degree of support from the prisoners themselves (Freeley, 1946, p. 26).

Norfolk had a fine library of several thousand volumes and prisoners were able to check out books of their choice. Malcolm X became a voracious and critical reader, discovering "new evidence to document the Muslim teachings" in books ranging from accounts of the slave trade to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (X, 1965b, pp. 185–186). Malcolm X's "prison education, including Elijah Muhammad," writes Baraka, "gives him the form with which overtly to combine consciousness with his actual life" (p. 26). As Malcolm X sought new outlets for his heightened political consciousness, he turned to the weekly formal debates sponsored by the inmate team. "My reading had my mind like steam under pressure," he recounted; "Some way, I had to start telling the white man about himself to his face. I decided to do this by putting my name down to debate" (1965b, p. 184).

Malcolm X's prison debate experience allowed him to bring his newly acquired historical knowledge and critical ideology to bear on a wide variety of social issues. "Whichever side of the selected subject was assigned to me, I'd track down and study everything I could find on it," wrote Malcolm X. "I'd put myself in my opponent's place and decide how I'd try to win if I had the other side; and then I'd figure

out a way to knock down those points" (1965b, p. 184). Preparation for each debate included four or five practice sessions. Debaters conducted individual research and also worked collaboratively in research teams (Bender, 1993). Visiting debaters "could not understand how we had the material to debate with them," recalls Malcolm Jarvis, Malcolm X's debate partner at Norfolk. "They were at the mercy of people with M.A.s and Ph.D.s to teach them," he explains.

The weekly Norfolk debates attracted large audiences, generally filling the three-hundred-seat prison theater. Most prisoners attended and the sessions also attracted curious visitors, usually invited representatives of organizations connected to the topic under discussion. These debates provided Malcolm X with the first large audiences of his speaking career.

I will tell you that right there, in the prison, debating, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been. Standing up there, the faces looking up at me, the things in my head coming out of my mouth, while my brain searched for the next best thing to follow what I was saying, and if I could sway them to my side by handling it right, then I had won the debate—once my feet got wet, I was gone on debating. (1965b, p. 184)

The Norfolk debate program provided Malcolm X with a new medium for the expression of his emerging political philosophy and with a regular forum in which he could both appeal to fellow prisoners and confront white adversaries, whether prisoners or visiting debaters representing prestigious colleges and universities. Jarvis recalls that he and Malcolm X debated on several occasions against teams from Harvard and Yale. Boston University, M.I.T., Holy Cross and other prominent New England colleges held annual debates with the prisoners and Oxford and Cambridge

both visited.² Austin Freeley, who coached the B.U. teams that competed at Norfolk during the 1940s, wrote that these debates were "of the highest quality" and the Norfolk debaters had won twice as many debates as they had lost in previous years (p. 26). Many of the debating prisoners had little formal education. Several of the best, including Malcolm X, were grade school or junior high dropouts, recalls coach Coleman Bender, yet "they went six years without losing a debate" against top collegiate teams during the 1950s. For Malcolm X, the possibility for victory in these encounters against privileged white opponents was a lesson in the importance of careful preparation and a testament to the power of truthful vision (Gambino, p. 17).

Some of the topics for debate proposed by the inmates dealt directly with the conditions of their own imprisonment, a phenomenon that created great discomfort among prison authorities. Norfolk officials sought to censor "controversial topics," particularly those involving issues in criminal justice (such as capital punishment, pay for prison labor and indeterminate sentencing), because they thought that "shutting out the news was the best way to keep control" (Bender). Yet the prisoners persisted. In an account of the inmates' debate on capital punishment written for the monthly newspaper, *The Colony*, Malcolm X offers a practical assessment of the death penalty's deterrent value from a prisoner's point of view: "Such actual deterrence can only result from mandatory death penalties, almost perfect detective forces, incorruptible police and judiciary, juries unswayed by human emotions and a stern unpardoning police." Even should these impossible

conditions be met, he warns, they "would result in such a large number of executions that the defenders of the death penalty would stand aghast" (Little, 1950, p. 9). By speaking and debating about the conditions of their own punishment, Norfolk inmates sought to reestablish themselves as subjects, rather than mere objects within the dominating discourse of others (hooks, 1989, p. 12). One repeated topic that particularly delighted the prisoners and irked prison authorities was "Resolved: That today's banks are too easy to rob." Norfolk's affirmative team included the convicted Brinks robbers (Bender).

In his autobiography, Malcolm X describes several of the debates in which he participated at Norfolk, from literary exchanges on the identity of Shakespeare (he argued that King James "was the real poet who used the *nom de plume* Shakespeare") to debates on historical topics in which he was able to employ his recent research on the history of African peoples and racial oppression (p. 185). On the topic, "Compulsory Military Training—Or None?," he seized upon his opponent's racist portrayal of the "primitive" Ethiopian defense against Italian invasion to illustrate both the continuing drive of European colonialism and the bravery of the Ethiopians, who in their resistance to racist oppression "would have thrown even their bare bodies at the airplanes because they had seen that they were fighting the devil incarnate." His opponents "yelled 'foul,' " because he had "made the subject a race issue" (p. 184). Such debates offered Malcolm X an opportunity to confront his white opponents with the fruits of his recent research and with his superior understanding of the role of race in social and political history. In a debate on the question of whether or not Homer had ever existed, he "threw into those white faces the theory that Homer only symbol-

² The Cambridge team defended the proposition that "Life is just a bowl of cherries." The opposing prisoners argued, "No, it's just the pits" (Bender, 1993).

ized how white Europeans kidnapped black Africans, then blinded them so that they could never get back to their own people" (p. 185). In the account of this debate in his autobiography, he recalls the use of etymological arguments ("Homer and Omar and *Moor*, you see, are all related terms") that would become a hallmark of his later public speeches and debates as a public figure.

Malcolm X spoke to predominantly white audiences and debated white opponents throughout his prison experience and often during his later public career. These encounters in part evidenced what Gambino has termed his "absolute faith in and reliance on the power of communication" to convince even whites of the truth of his position (p. 17). "The truth is so strong and clear," wrote X in a letter in 1954, "that not even the white man himself will deny it once he knows what we know" (Gambino, p. 17). But his expressed desire to "confront the white man" in debate was perhaps not so much designed to convert his adversaries as it was to assert himself and his sense of self-worth, to apply his learning, and, as in his later public appearances, to appeal to the large audience of fellow African American prisoners. "By defeating the white man in debate," writes Wolfenstein, "he was proving, to himself and to other black prisoners, the superiority of his position" (1981, p. 228). To the "concentric" audience of his fellow inmates, such encounters established his leadership and demonstrated the truth and strength of his beliefs (Branham and Pearce, 1987, p. 245). According to Malcolm Jarvis, interviewed in Orlando Bagwell's 1994 documentary, *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*, it was when Malcolm X began debating that his "name and fame started spreading amongst the prison population and that's when the population started to grow at the debating classes. Most of the

fellows used to come over out of curiosity, just to hear him speak." Malcolm X began proselytizing for the Nation of Islam while at Norfolk (Gambino, p. 14), and his fame as a debater there helped gain the attention and respect that were prerequisites for successful recruitment.

By the time Bender arrived at Norfolk in 1950 or 1951, the prison's Muslim population had separated themselves from the debate team and other prison organizations. After refusing to take a required typhoid inoculation, Malcolm X was transferred to Charlestown Prison on 23 March 1950 (Perry, p. 132). Malcolm X had spent less than two years in Norfolk, yet during his time there he had undergone enormous spiritual, political and intellectual transformation. Malcolm X's prison debating experience represented a crucial transition in his practice as a Muslim and in the development of a public style through which he could bring his thoughts before a larger audience. Through his prison proselytizing and the "polemical confrontations" of his debates, writes Wolfenstein, "Malcolm became fully engaged in a Muslim practice grounded in racial self-identification and mediated through self-productive aggressivity" (p. 229). He had acquired proficiency in techniques of verbal confrontation and a confidence in the possibilities of moral suasion that would inform his speaking activities for the remainder of his life. "It was right there in prison," Malcolm X recalls in his autobiography, "that I made up my mind to devote the rest of my life to telling the white man about himself—or die" (pp. 184–185).

DEBATE AND THE PUBLIC CAREER OF MALCOLM X

In the years following his release from prison, Malcolm X honed his speaking skills through sidewalk preaching and his

ministry in New York Temple No. 7 and other mosques. He gained national attention in the late 1950s through a series of public confrontations with Black clergy, civil rights leaders and the press. After complaining about the lack of coverage of the NOI in the *Amsterdam News*, he was given his own column in which he blasted Christian ministers as "chicken-eaters" who served "the slaveowners' church." When a delegation of prominent New York ministers protested, editor James Hicks offered them equal space in a column that would run beside Malcolm X's—a debate in print. "By the third week," Hicks recalls, "it was apparent that, by having a target, Malcolm was even more devastating. Malcolm *murdered* the man" (Goldman, 1973, p. 61). Hicks' rhetorical assessment was an astute one. Malcolm X was at his best when able to use the ideas of another as a foil for his own, which shone most brightly in the light generated by confrontation.

In the summer of 1959, Malcolm X and the NOI were the subjects of an inflammatory week-long television documentary, *The Hate That Hate Produced*, reported by journalist Louis Lomax, with whom Malcolm X would later engage in four debates. In the wake of the broadcast, Malcolm X was interviewed by virtually every major American newspaper and magazine. He and the Nation's leadership "happily anticipated that now, through the white man's powerful communications media," Elijah Muhammad's teachings would be heard by all African Americans "and devils, too" (1965b, 237). Malcolm X's early interactions with white reporters were often highly confrontational, more debates than interviews. "The reporters were angry" and "I was angry," he recalls in his autobiography. When he made historical arguments about white oppression, "they would quit interviewing, quit their work,

trying to defend their personal white selves" (p. 242). Malcolm X's abstract references to "the devil white man" were for him given concrete form in these exchanges. With their "self-righteous tricks and nerve and gall" in argumentation, "the voices questioning me became to me as breathing, living devils" (p. 240).

On 15 April 1959, Malcolm X appeared at an African Freedom Day Celebration with a group of Harlem political leaders and the Liberian ambassador to the U.N. He appealed for unity in the battle against a common white enemy, urging those who appeared with him to "put aside all petty differences of religion and politics," to "come together and hear each other" (FBI, 1978, R.1, 50).³ Instead, most church and political leaders, as well as the representatives of major civil rights organizations, distanced themselves from Malcolm X or openly denounced him. With Muhammad's approval he "began returning their fire" and "before very long, radio and television people began asking me to defend our Nation of Islam in panel discussions and debates" (X, 1965b, pp. 243–244). By November 1960, according to FBI reports of a statement by Minister Thomas J.X., the NOI had designated Malcolm X, "a fine speaker and respected for his ability to talk on any question," as the "one man who was used for all debates" (R. 2, 4).

With Malcolm X as its appointed gladiator, public debates became a primary tool in the efforts of the NOI to defend itself from the hailstorm of criticism and to spread its own message to new listeners. From 1960 through 1964, as the chart below indicates, Malcolm X appeared in

³ Ironically, the FBI surveillance files on Malcolm X obtained through Freedom Of Information Act requests provide the only known record of many of his appearances and include transcriptions of recordings and stenographic records of many of his otherwise unpublished speeches. Because of their hostile intent, these reports must be used with caution.

over two dozen formal debates with local and national civil rights leaders, prominent writers, and white and African American college faculty confronted on their home campuses. These debates generally featured set topics (usually racial separation versus integration) and were sometimes moderated. Future Reagan Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, then host of a talk show on San Francisco's KQED TV, moderated Malcolm X's 11 May 1961 debate with attorney Terry Francois; Roger Fisher, Professor at Harvard Law School and future author of the best-selling *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, moderated his debate against Walter Carrington. The formats for these debates varied widely, sometimes featuring a single lengthy speech by each participant, sometimes permitting direct extension and rebuttals. Most included a period of questions and answers.

This listing does not include his confrontational panel or interview appearances; nor does it include the frequent spontaneous debates in which Malcolm X participated, sometimes in public. When historian and Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger denounced the NOI as racists comparable to the Ku Klux Klan during a speech at Spelman College on 17 January 1961, for example, he was unaware that Malcolm X was in the audience. "In a brief but decisive exchange," the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported, "the fiery Mr. X 'victoriously crossed swords' " with the speaker, "forced the learned Harvard historian into a 'diplomatic withdrawal' of his earlier statement, and then maneuvered him into admitting he would have to seek further information before making any more statements about the Black Muslims." Malcolm X invited the humbled Schlesinger to attend his upcoming lecture in Washington so that he might learn more ("Malcolm X Howard U.," 1961, p. 3).

Why did Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam rely so heavily on debates as the verbal form for their public address? Given the heterodoxy of the NOI's positions, its open and strident critique of other civil rights and religious organizations, and its increasing visibility and membership during the late 1950s, verbal confrontation—whether with proximate or remote adversaries—was inevitable. Malcolm X and the NOI clearly preferred proximate and public exchanges. In an interview broadcast over Washington's WUST Radio on 12 May 1963, Malcolm X explained that

I would like to sit down over the same microphone with them and across the same table. This is what most Negro leaders are afraid to do; they want to talk about me behind my back. They want to talk about us when we are not here to defend ourselves. I will talk about them sitting right here and I want them to do the same thing and that is what you call fair or equality. (FBI, R.2, 17)

Particularly in the initial period of their public campaign, such visibly equal standing with representatives of major civil rights organizations granted legitimacy and credibility to the NOI and Malcolm X. At the same time, the face-to-face exchanges of Malcolm X's public debates enacted the confrontational politics of the NOI. The prospect of such confrontation in turn assured greater publicity and larger audiences for the teachings of Muhammad. As the 19th century British agitator George Jacob Holyoake observed, "To him who believes he has the truth, opposition is an opportunity" (1897, p. 75). Malcolm X's stated aims in debate were confrontation and communication. He saw in debate a way of revealing *truth*, of showing one set of ideas to be superior to another. "Raw naked truth exchanged between the black man and the white man is" needed to "clear the air of the racial mirages, cliches, and lies" that have marked

Date	Location	Opponent(s)	Topic
3 Mar. 1960	<i>Pro and Con</i> , WMCA Radio, NY City	Rev. William E. James, Metro. Methodist Church	"Is Black Supremacy the Answer?"
20 Oct. 1960	Yale U. Law School	Herbert Wright, National NAACP Youth Secretary	"Separatism is Better for Negroes than Integration"
7 Nov. 1960	WBAI Radio, NY City		
2 Mar. 1961	CCNY	Rev. C. Lawrence	"Islam vs. Christianity"
2 Mar. 1961	CCNY	Herbert Wright	"Separation vs. Integration"
10 Mar. 1961	WINS Radio, NY City	Louis Lomax, author	"Separation or Integration"
17 Mar. 1961	Clark College, Atlanta	Rev. Samuel Williams	
24 Mar. 1961	Harvard Law School	Walter Carrington, atty.	"Integration Against Separation"
19 Apr. 1961	Yale U.	Louis Lomax	
11 May 1961	KQED TV, San Francisco	Terry Francois, atty., Pres., San Francisco NAACP	
30 Oct. 1961	Howard U.	Bayard Rustin, Pres., War Resisters League	"Separation Against Integration"
3 Nov. 1961	Rutgers U., College of Pharmacy, Newark	Prof. William Brown, Rutgers	"Separation Against Integration"
22 Nov. 1961	Los Angeles State College	Edward Warren, NAACP	"Integration Against Separation"
23 Jan. 1962	The Community Church, NY City	Bayard Rustin	"Separation Against Integration"
Feb. 1962	U. of Chicago	Willoughby Abner, CORE	"Separation Against Integration"
7 Mar. 1962	Cornell U.	James Farmer, Nat'l Dir., CORE	"Which Way Civil Rights—Integration or Separation?"
28 Mar. 1962	Morgan State College	Prof. August Meier	
Nov. 1962	Conference on "The Mind of the Ghetto," Oakland, CA	Wilford Ussery, CORE, & Don Warden, Afro-American Assn.	
24 Mar. 1963	Locust St. School, Roselle, NJ	John Harvard, Elizabeth, NJ	"Separation vs. Integration"
27 Mar. 1963	<i>Court of Reason</i> , Ch. 13 TV, NY City	Dr. Milton A. Galamison, Siloam Presbyterian Church	"The Negro in American Life—Can Integration Be Achieved?"
9 Nov. 1963	Chicago	James Baldwin, author	
3 Apr. 1964	Cory Methodist Church, Cleveland, OH	Louis Lomax	"What Next in the Negro Revolt?"
23 May 1964	Opera House, Chicago	Louis Lomax	"Which Way Goes the Negro?"
3 Dec. 1964	Oxford U. Debate Union	Humphrey Berkeley and Lord Stonham, M.P.	"Extremism in the Defense of Liberty is No Vice"

this country's history, he explained. Such confrontations represent not a "break-down" of communication, which has never truly existed, but rather the basis for a genuine exchange rooted in truth (1965b, p. 273).

The most obvious reason that the NOI placed such emphasis on public debates was Malcolm X's astonishing proficiency in debating. Malcolm X's success in debates exemplified the power of Muhammad's

teachings, both in the battle of competing ideas and in the possibility of human transformation represented by his performances. As heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali remarked in a 28 February 1965 interview after Malcolm X's death: "He's nothing but a fellow who was an ex-dope addict, a prisoner, a jailbird who had no education, couldn't read or write, who heard about the honorable Elijah Muhammad, who took him off the streets,

cleaned him up and educated him enough to go out and debate and you might say defeat any opponent that he met" (FBI, R.2, 49). To fellow Muslims, his debates provided a dramatic demonstration of Elijah Muhammad's abilities to empower and redeem the lives of his followers.

Malcolm X's public debates may be divided into two basic categories for further discussion: his debates with local and national civil rights leaders and speakers; and his debates with faculty and alumni on college campuses.

Debates with Civil Rights Leaders

The basic elements of Malcolm X's debate strategy and strategic use of debates in public relations were evident in his first public debate, in which he faced Rev. William E. James, pastor of the Metropolitan Community Methodist Church in Harlem, on 3 March 1960. Broadcast on New York's WMCA Radio, the debate was heard in several states and overseas, via the Voice of America. William Kunstler, then Professor of Law at New York Law School (and soon to gain fame as attorney for two of the defendants charged with the murder of Malcolm X) moderated the debate, which consisted of separately taped statements by Malcolm X and James, brought into direct clash through questioning by Kunstler.

James was not the first choice to oppose Malcolm X. Invitations had been extended to better-known leaders, including A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Lester Granger and James Robinson, but all refused ("Malcolm X, Rev. James," 1960, p. 21). Wilkins and Granger sniped from what they felt was a safe distance. In the course of the debate with James, Kunstler asked Malcolm X to respond to Wilkins' comparison of the NOI to the Ku Klux Klan. Malcolm X first expressed mock disbelief that Wilkins had made such a

claim: "Wilkins is actually too intelligent to have made that statement." He then recalled Wilkins' own claim of ignorance regarding the NOI when interviewed a few months earlier for *The Hate That Hate Produced*. "I wonder how he could so suddenly become an authority on us," Malcolm X mused. "At any rate," he said, "I will challenge Roy Wilkins any time, any where and under any conditions to a public debate concerning his charges that we who follow the Muslim faith are no better or are no different than the Ku Klux Klan," deftly turning Wilkins' charge into an issue of religious intolerance and the debate with local leader James into a bid for national recognition (FBI, R.1, p. 3).

Three days after his debate with Rev. James, according to FBI reports, Malcolm X played a tape recording of it during an NOI meeting held at New York's Temple No. 7. He stopped the tape recorder at times to offer caustic observations on the exchange. "I think the purpose behind the playback of the broadcast was to make a fool of the Christian preacher," the FBI informant noted (R. 1, p. 51). With his Muslim audience, Malcolm X used the debate to prove the bias of the white media ("Did you notice the questions the white man asked the Uncle Tom preacher?"), the complicity of African American Christian leaders ("Did you notice how the preacher looked for excuses for the white man?"), and the superiority of Elijah Muhammad's teachings when placed in direct confrontation with alternative views. Malcolm X's debates served as appeals to an *internal* movement audience as well as to a broader public (Simons, 1970, p. 1). For both audiences, they demonstrated the increasing power and visibility of the NOI.

Despite Malcolm's baiting, however, Wilkins and most other major civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King,

Jr., and Whitney Young, pointedly refused invitations to debate him, particularly after his highly publicized encounters with Bayard Rustin and James Farmer. Wilkins and King withdrew even from ceremonial events to which Malcolm X had been invited, so as not to risk the sort of spontaneous exchange to which Schlesinger had fallen victim. Wilkins also advised Farmer not to debate Malcolm X again (Goldman, p. 16). Yet Malcolm X was able to secure debates with some prominent opponents and with others whose local or national connections to national civil rights organizations lent heightened significance to these exchanges. Herbert Wright, Walter Carrington, and Terry Francois were identified as representatives of the NAACP in their debates with Malcolm X; James Farmer, Willoughby Abner, Wilford Ussery and Louis Lomax appeared on behalf of CORE; Bayard Rustin was closely identified with King and the SCLC (and described as a "King aide" in press accounts of his debates with Malcolm X). Such confrontations were framed not as debates between two individuals but as contests between competing organizations and philosophies.

Malcolm X's debates with civil rights leaders and organizational representatives on the question of "Integration or Separation?" drew huge crowds. "Malcolm nearly always won these encounters, or at least the crowds who attended them," according to Peter Goldman, "partly because he was so brilliant at it, partly because he was unconstrained by the conventional niceties of debate, and partly because he pre-empted a kind of moral high ground for himself" (p. 16). Whether Malcolm X won these debates in a technical sense, proving NOI policies to be comparatively advantageous to those advocated by his opponents, was less important than the fact that

he was understood to be in control of the exchanges, dictating their terms and tenor.

Some debates are governed by an implicit meta-topic that overshadows the stated resolution. In presidential and vice-presidential candidate debates, for example, the question of who has offered the best technical responses to questions posed is far less important than the question of who will make the best president. The candidate who seeks to score debating points in these exchanges may lose by "winning." The stated topic for a debate with Malcolm X might be "Integration vs. Separation," but the meta-topic might better be stated as "Who best expresses Black anger, frustration, pride and power?" Malcolm X was highly adept at debating the individual issues in an exchange, but he was unmatched when it came to this larger question. Because this meta-topic was best addressed through direct confrontation, debate was an appropriate rhetorical choice for Malcolm X and the NOI. The predominance of the meta-topic in Malcolm X's debates made it possible for audiences who remained opposed to his policies, such as a largely integrationist crowd at Howard University, to perceive him as "winning" the debate. Michael Thelwell, a student at Howard who witnessed the debate between Malcolm X and Bayard Rustin, observed that:

The audience just erupted, and it continued through the whole course of that debate. Whether or not Malcolm won that debate doesn't matter; the fact is that emotionally and intellectually he was in total control. It wasn't necessarily just the function of rhetoric or the elegance of poetry in the delivery, it was the message. . . . Integration, as I now reflect on it, was the aim of the vast majority of the upwardly mobile Howard University students, and yet that whole place erupted viscerally, powerfully, with a shout. . . . I've never really seen a crowd respond quite that way, especially a crowd I'd have predicted to respond just the opposite way. (Gallen, 1992, p. 50)

Much to the chagrin of his opponents, particularly Rustin, even white listeners seemed to give Malcolm X most of their applause. (Goldman, p. 67).

Malcolm X challenged the apparent consensus on civil rights movement aims (integration) and tactics (nonviolence) at the point of their widest celebration in the white-dominated press. In reading the transcripts of Malcolm X's early debates and confrontational panel discussions with civil rights leaders, one is struck by the sheer incredulity with which Malcolm X's arguments were greeted. He challenged assumptions that had been accepted without question, changing the frame of the debate. "The thing that bothers me, Mr. X," admitted psychologist Kenneth Clark in his 15 October 1961 panel confrontation on NBC's *Open Mind*, "is that you put me in a position that requires me to take a position—defending the American system—which I'm not particularly comfortable with" (Clarke, p. 155). This was, of course, exactly what Malcolm X intended to do and repeatedly managed to do against opponents who gathered to condemn him, but soon found that they and their ideas were on trial.

Malcolm X later recalled of these early television appearances that "In the prison days, I had learned tricks to upset my opponents, to catch them where they didn't expect to be caught" and now was determined to supplement these with new skills tailored to "arguing on the air" (1965b, p. 244). In order to prepare himself for his public confrontations, Malcolm X continued the practice from his prison debates of pretending to be his opponent, so that he might anticipate the strongest possible arguments of his adversary. He reviewed tapes of prior speeches to identify successful and unsuccessful lines of argument. He carefully rehearsed his arguments, sometimes while driving

his car (Perry, p. 179). He developed stock and highly effective responses to standard arguments that his opponents were likely to make. "One has the feeling," wrote Kenneth Clark in 1963, "that Minister Malcolm has anticipated every question and is prepared with the appropriate answer, an answer which is consistent with the general position" of the NOI (p. 17). This commitment to systematic anticipation, strategic planning and briefing gave Malcolm X a decided advantage over most opponents (Branham, 1991, p. 97).

Knowing that his integrationist opponents in debate were likely to claim isolated victories in integration, such as lunch counter desegregation, as proof of the superiority of their approach, Malcolm X prepared succinct and vivid counter-descriptions of these efforts (the right "to have a cup of tea with a cracker," as he put it in his 2 March 1961 debate with NAACP Youth Secretary Herbert Wright). He punctured the false impression that racial oppression had been significantly diminished. In a 1961 NBC panel exchange, Constance Baker Motley asked him, "You recognize, don't you that they have made some progress and that there has been greater dignity accorded the American Negro? We don't disagree on that, do we?" To Motley's apparent surprise, Malcolm X responded:

As a lawyer, I'm sure you'll agree that if you put a man in prison illegally and unjustly, one who has not committed a crime, and after putting him there you keep him in solitary confinement, it's doubly cruel. Now if you let him out of solitary into the regular prison yard, you can call that progress if you want, but the man was not supposed to be put in prison in the first place. Now you have 20 million black people in America who are begging for some kind of recognition as human beings and the average white man today thinks we're making progress. (Clarke, p. 154)

Malcolm X aligned Motley with white apologists for gradualism; the claim of

judicial and legislative progress by her and other integrationists, he argued, concealed the basic truth of the conditions faced by African Americans. In later appearances, Malcolm X developed an even more effective analogy to expose what he believed to be the fallacious reasoning of opponents who claimed progress based on isolated successes in integration: "You don't stick a knife in a man's back nine inches and then pull it out six inches and say you're making progress." The distinction was not a quibble about terminology but rather reflected a fundamental difference in rhetorical strategy: "It's dangerous to even make the white man *think* we're making progress while the knife is still in our backs, or while the wound is still there, or while even the intention that he had is still there" (Goldman, p. 16). He worried that the acknowledgement of progress would breed complacency and lessen the felt urgency of further progress in human rights.

The "knife" metaphor and other vivid but stock responses were sprung on numerous occasions against different opponents. These retorts were not spontaneous but carefully prepared and "sandbagged" in anticipation of the opportunity to use them in a debate or other public confrontation. When such opportunities did not present themselves, Malcolm X created them.

If I had developed a good point, though, I'd bait a hook to get it said when I went on radio or television. I'd seem to slip and mention some recent so-called civil rights "advance". . . When I "slipped," the program host would leap on that bait: "Ahhh! Indeed, Mr. Malcolm X—you can't deny *that's* an advance for your race!"

I'd jerk the pole then. "I can't turn around without hearing about some 'civil rights advance'! White people seem to think the black man ought to be shouting 'hallelujah'! Four hundred years the white man has had his foot-long knife in the black man's back—and now the white man starts to *wiggle* the knife out, maybe six inches! The black

man's supposed to be *grateful*? Why, if the white man jerked the knife *out*, it's still going to leave a *scar*!" (1965b, p. 270)

The apparent holes that Malcolm X sometimes left exposed in his own arguments, as James Baldwin observed, often "were not loopholes at all, but hangman's knots, as whoever rushed for the loophole immediately discovered" (Gallen, p. 268). Most of the arguments made against Malcolm X were familiar and predictable. While his ever-changing opponents continued to reinvent the argumentative wheel, Malcolm X rehearsed and refined his responses.

Malcolm X constructed analogies to clarify issues of moral action and evaluation and to expose the faulty reasoning of his opponents.¹ He made extensive use of what has been termed the logical analogy, or parallel case, to isolate the principle behind his opponent's argument and apply it to a situation in which it would appear more obviously wrong (Govier, pp. 269–271). On February 18, 1965, four days after the bombing of his home, Malcolm X appeared in a panel debate on New York's WINS radio with Gordon Hall, a self-identified "expert on extremist organizations." Hall denounced him for "breaking bread with the communists downtown" by having "given several speeches which they have reprinted" and spoken at gatherings they sponsored. Malcolm X responded by raising a series of analogous counter-examples in which Hall's claim would appear absurd:

I spoke in a church in Rochester a couple of nights ago. Does that make me a Methodist? . . . Just because you speak somewhere doesn't make you that. . . I was in Selma, Alabama, last week, speaking in Martin Luther King's church. Does that make me a follower of Martin Luther King? No, your line of reasoning, sir doesn't fit me. (Breitman, p. 179)

Because Malcolm X's differences with

King and Christianity were widely known, his audience could recognize the fault in the parallel cases and, by implication, in the primary subject. When a Black opponent in one debate insisted that, contrary to Malcolm X's claims, he regarded himself as an American, Malcolm X asked "Why?" "Because I was born in this country," his unwitting adversary answered. Speaking softly, Malcolm X closed the trap: "Now, brother, if a cat has kittens in the oven, does that make them biscuits?" (Farmer, 224).

Malcolm X was able to characterize his opponents and their arguments through pointed metaphor with devastating effect. In one of his best known metaphors, he depicted Black integrationist opponents as "house negroes" from slavery times, doing the bidding of their white masters. Metaphor was used to shape perception of the primary subject, not simply to reason analogically. When Bayard Rustin criticized him for his use of emotionalism in their debate at the New York Community Church, Malcolm X responded by asking: "When a man is hanging on a tree and he cries out, should he cry out *unemotionally*? When a man is sitting on a hot stove and he tells you how it feels to be there, is he supposed to speak without emotion?" (Goldman, p. 14). Rustin was left to deny the crisis or decry its protest.

The effectiveness of Malcolm X's responses was greatly enhanced by their clear responsiveness. He obviously listened to his opponents with great care and rebutted or coopted their arguments with unmistakable clarity. Malcolm X could seize the underlying premise of an opponent's position and turn it to his advantage. When James Farmer of CORE argued in their Cornell University debate that Malcolm X's plan for separation was unrealistic and infeasible, Malcolm X

turned the tables in rebuttal:

And any time integrationists, NAACP, CORE, Urban League, or what you have, will stand up and tell me to spell out how we are going to bring about separation, and here they are integrationists, a philosophy which is supposed to have the support of the Senate, Congress, President, and the Supreme Court, and still with all of that support and hypocritical agreeing, eight years after the desegregation decision, you still don't have what the court decided on. (1962, p. 18)

Malcolm X dismissed integration itself as utterly unrealistic and infeasible, explaining that although "hand-picked Negroes" like Farmer might find a home with whites, "if all of the black people went into the white community, over night you would have a race war" (1962, p. 18). He deflected the charge back toward its source, knowing that ultimately Farmer had far more to lose from the charge's acceptance.

Malcolm X's brilliant performances in debates that challenged the assumptions and practices of the major civil rights leaders and organizations at the height of their public success were not without a price. He found himself increasingly isolated from movement events and leaders, removed in "a kind a quarantine that lifted only with his death" (Goldman, pp. 16).

Campus Debates

Many of Malcolm X's debates were held on college campuses, where he would be pitted against either another African American political leader or one or more faculty members of the institution he visited. He was reported to be "the second most popular speaker" on college campuses (after Barry Goldwater) and drew large audiences, often with the promise of verbal combat (X, 1965b, pp. 281-282). Like the traveling pugilists of earlier times, Malcolm X would enter a college town and challenge all comers to "go a round with the champ." "Sometimes in a panel or

debate experience," he wrote, "I'd find a jam-packed audience to hear me, alone, facing six or eight student and faculty scholars—heads of departments such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, and religion, and each of them coming at me in his specialty" (1965b, p. 282). He enjoyed the excitement and challenge of these verbal battles with students and faculty, fought with "intellectual and philosophical bullets" (p. 282).

Although Malcolm X often spoke in his campus debates of his own lack of educational credentials, he also expressed confidence in the superior *knowledge* that had guided him in prison debates against students from elite colleges: "Mr. Muhammad has taught me that I never need fear any man's intellect who tries to defend or justify the white man's record against the non-white man" (1965b, p. 282). Malcolm X was especially vitriolic toward African American scholars whom he confronted in debate. He regarded those who supported integration as "house Negroes" doing the white man's bidding and invariably referred to them with the contemptuous honorific, "Doctor" (Goldman, p. 15).

One particular university's "token-integrated" black Ph.D. associate professor I never will forget; he got me so mad I couldn't see straight. As badly as our 22 millions of educationally deprived black people need the help of any brains he has, there he was looking like some fly in the buttermilk among white "colleagues"—and he was trying to *eat me up!* He was ranting about what a "divisive demagogue" and what a "reverse racist" I was. I was racking my head, to spear that fool; finally I held up my hand, and he stopped. "Do you know what white racists call black Ph.D.s?" He said something like, "I believe that I happen not to be aware of that"—You know, one of those ultra-proper-talking Negroes. And I laid the word down on him, loud: "*Nigger!*" (1965b, p. 284)

White scholar August Meier has described the preparations for his debate on integration with Malcolm X, held on the campus of Morgan State in March, 1962.

Meier had witnessed the debate between Malcolm X and Bayard Rustin at Howard University a few weeks earlier. "Aware of Malcolm's formidable reputation and his strong showing in debating Rustin," he "quickly began to rue" his decision (p. 31). Meier prepared for the debate (of which no complete transcript survives) with the assistance of students from the Omega Psi Phi fraternity (including Stokely Carmichael), who advised him to avoid any appearance of defense against Malcolm X's charges of racial injustice. Meier instead embraced Malcolm X's indictment of the quality of African American life and joined him in condemning gradualism and various false charges made against the Nation of Islam. Although important differences remained between them, Malcolm X's success in prior debates had clearly shaped the discourse in this one. The strategy by which Meier felt he had held his own against Malcolm X was one in which he narrowed the distinctions between their positions, conceding much ground in the hope of saving some (Meier, p. 32). James Farmer followed a similar strategy. "My plan," he recalls, "was to give Malcolm's speech" (p. 225). Although this strategy may have saved its adherents from the embarrassment that befell other debaters at Malcolm X's hands, and may have secured a technical advantage on some arguments, it conceded control of the exchange and victory on the meta-topic to him.

At the height of his campus popularity, in September 1962, according to FBI surveillance, Elijah Muhammad abruptly ordered Malcolm X to cancel all future appearances on college campuses. Muhammad reportedly "felt that these appearances gained them no converts and only provided an opportunity for the NOI to be 'blasted' in public" (FBI, R.2, p. 24). Malcolm X himself came to believe that Muhammad cancelled these appearances

out of jealousy over his success in them (1965b, pp. 284–285). He appeared in no more campus debates until after his break with the Nation of Islam in March, 1964.

During his trip to Europe in late 1964, less than three months before his murder, Malcolm X participated in a televised debate at the venerable Oxford University Union that was to be one of the greatest triumphs of his speaking career. Along with Scottish poet and nationalist Hugh McDermid, he upheld the proposition that "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue," a quotation from the conservative Senator Barry Goldwater. Malcolm X himself had often been portrayed as an "extremist" and, indeed, had embraced that term in his first radio debate with Rev. James ("When a person is a racial extremist, to me he's extreme in his desire and in his love and in his devotion to his race"). In the Oxford debate, he explained:

I don't believe in any form of *unjustified* extremism, but when a man is exercising extremism in the defense of liberty for human beings I do not consider that a vice. When a man is moderate in defense of justice for human beings I say that he is a sinner. (Protz, 1964, p. 2)

Extremism, he argued, was a logical response to the failure of legislative and judicial remedies for segregation. If the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision had still not been implemented even in major northern cities a decade later, he argued, why have faith in the legal process? If "twenty-three out of thirty-six" congressional committees were "in the hands of southern racialists," why look to Congress? If the police themselves attacked Black women and children demonstrating for freedom ("You've seen it yourself," he said in reference to the worldwide coverage of the previous year's confrontations in Birming-

ham), "then I say those people are justified to resort to any means necessary to bring about justice where the Government can't give them justice" (FBI, R.2, 3).

Malcolm X was angered by the flippant approach of his Oxford opponent, Humphrey Berkeley, Tory member of the House of Commons, who compared him to the head of South Africa's apartheid regime (Bethune, 1969, p. 233). Characteristically, Malcolm X turned his opponent's insult against him, adopting it as an illustration of the affirmative position.

You make my point, that as long as a white man does it it's all right—a black man is supposed to have no feelings. (APPLAUSE) But when a black man strikes back he's an extremist; he's supposed to sit passively and have no feelings, be non-violent, and love his enemy—no matter what kind of attack, be it verbal or otherwise, he's supposed to take it. But if he stands up and in any way tries to defend himself, ha, ha, ha, ha, then he's an extremist. (APPLAUSE). (FBI, R.2)

In conclusion, Malcolm X paraphrased Hamlet to justify the use of "any means necessary," including armed resistance, to achieve freedom. *Hamlet*, he said, had wondered "whether it was nobler in the mind of man to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in moderation, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them." King and other advocates of non-violence supported the former position; Malcolm X defended the latter. After a brief silence, the crowd erupted in "thunderous applause" (Protz, p. 2).

Malcolm X's campus debates brought his ideas and those of the NOI before many new listeners on the campuses of both predominantly white and historically Black institutions. In some instances, notably his debates with Bayard Rustin and his appearance at the Oxford Union, they attracted significant press coverage and large extended audiences. Broadcast on the BBC's main national network, Mal-

colm X's debate at the Oxford Union was seen by an estimated ten million people, perhaps the largest viewing audience for any speech of his career.

In the Oxford Union debate and other public appearances during the last year of his life, Malcolm X took very different approaches to the organizational issues that had been the focus of his early debates. "I, for one, will join in with anyone," he told his Oxford audience, "I don't care what color you are as long as you want to change this miserable condition" (FBI, R.2, p. 3). After his break with the NOI, Malcolm X similarly downplayed the controversy that had furnished the most popular topic for his early debates: "Integration or Separation?" In his 8 April 1964 speech in New York City, he explained that there was no reason to choose between them. "We are not fighting for integration, nor are we fighting for separation," he told his listeners; "We are fighting for recognition as human beings." Integration and separation, he argued, were not objectives in themselves, but rather different means to the same end, the achievement of "freedom, justice, equality, and human dignity" (X, 1966, p. 9). In the last year of his life, Malcolm X sought to transcend prior disputes and forge inter-organizational unity.

During this period, Malcolm X remained committed to political and verbal confrontation, particularly with white politicians, and to public debate as a means by which to enact such confrontation. He became disenchanted, however, with the prospects for public debate within a political system dominated by those responsible for the very injustices under discussion. On 26 March 1964, Malcolm X went to Washington to observe Senate debate on the Civil Rights Act. Nearly the whole day was spent in procedural wrangling, evading direct discussion of racial injustice or

its proposed remedies (*Congressional Record*, 1964, pp. 6421-6431). Meeting with reporters outside the Senate chamber, Malcolm X denounced the Congress as an unsuitable forum for such a discussion and an unlikely agent of justice. "Usually the criminal who committed the crime is never the one to whom you look for a solution," he explained (Goldman, p. 70).

Malcolm X pursued a grand plan to alter the focus and forum of further debates about American racism by internationalizing them. On 17 July 1964, Malcolm X began a campaign to persuade the members of the Organization of African Unity to bring the matter of U.S. racism before the U.N., just as the O.A.U. had done with South African apartheid (Handler, 1964, p. 22). By taking "the case of the black man in this country before the nations in the U.N.," he argued, the domestic civil rights struggle could be expanded "to the level of human rights." The world would see that "Uncle Sam's hands are dripping with blood" and that, while "posing as the leader of the free world," in fact "he's the earth's number one hypocrite." In the General Assembly of the United Nations, unlike the domestic power structure, "our African brothers," along with Asian and Latin American nations, "can throw their weight on our side" (X, 1965a, pp. 34-35). Malcolm X did not expect that the U.N. would produce meaningful changes in American society, but he believed no forum could better "internationalize" the debate or provide such a "perfect theater" for the "humiliation" of the United States (Goldman, p. 156). At the height of the Cold War struggle for the political alignment of developing nations, the prospect for such theatrics was viewed with great alarm by U.S. officials. Had Malcolm X succeeded more fully in this campaign before his death, U.S. State and Justice Department

officials were reported to believe, the United States "would find itself in the same category as South Africa, Hungary and other countries whose domestic policies have become debating issues at the United Nations." Having become the subject of debate itself, they argued, would have undermined "the position the United States has asserted for itself as the leader of the West in the advocacy of human rights" (Handler, p. 22). This is precisely what occurred in the turbulent U.N. politics of the next decade, as U.S. influence in the organization reached its lowest ebb.

As Malcolm X had earlier used public debates to discredit rival leaders and organizations, he sought to employ the U.N. as the one forum in which "the United States" as an entity might be engaged in debate on terms that it did not fully control. He spent much of his last year striving to create such a discussion, a dedication that demonstrates his conviction that open debate on American racial conditions—verbal confrontation before the widest possible audience—was a necessary if not sufficient condition for meaningful change.

CONCLUSION

Malcolm X's public debates have been neglected in the resurgence of scholarly and popular interest in his life and words. Yet it is clear that debating was for him a singularly important form of public address and one in which he was remarkably proficient. Shortly after his appearance at the Oxford Union, perhaps the most celebrated debating society in the world, its members judged Malcolm X to be among the greatest living speakers (Illo, 1966, p. 12). "He was," as John Henrik Clarke has written, "a master debater and defender of his ideas and his movement." (p. 147).

Debate was Malcolm X's primary mode

of public address. Its use represented a deliberate rhetorical choice regarding how his ideas might best be advanced. The debate format accorded equal standing to his then-radical ideas and enacted the politics of confrontation that he espoused as essential for African American dignity. So important was the act of debating to his rhetorical designs that he applied the frame of debate to individual speech appearances in which no adversary spoke. Several of his more famous individual speeches are properly considered not in isolation, but rather in the context of a debate he initiated and sustained regarding conditions, leadership and tactics. His two most famous and studied speeches, "Message to the Grass Roots" and "The Ballot or the Bullet," are excerpted from debates of which his immediate listeners would have been fully aware. The former, a stock speech delivered on numerous occasions during the Fall of 1963, is a detailed denunciation of the August March on Washington (redubbed the "Farce on Washington") and of the principles expressed in King's celebrated speech on that occasion. The most widely anthologized version of Malcolm X's "Ballot or Bullet" speech is in fact drawn from a staged encounter at Cleveland's Cory Methodist Church with Louis Lomax, his most frequent debate opponent, whose speech defending the CORE philosophy preceded his own (1965a, p. 23). With certain rivals, such as King, who refused to meet him in proximate debate, such long-distance encounters offered the only possible form of engagement.

Whether in explicit debates on stage with other speakers, or in the direct challenges and rebuttals posed in his individual speeches against absent interlocutors, Malcolm X saw in debate a means by which to redirect the battle for human rights toward new assumptions and new

alliances. As Malcolm X had learned in prison, debate, more than any other form of public address, frames one's remarks for concentric listeners, as the speaker's transaction with one party is "overheard" by another, primary audience, and directs listeners' attention to the meta-communicative level of the encounter.

Malcolm X's debating experience at Norfolk Prison Colony forged the tools of critical analysis, research, and disputation that he would master later in his public encounters. "Prison debating had been my only experience speaking to anyone but Muslims," he reflected as he began to receive offers to appear on radio and television (X, 1965b, p. 244). "That's where he got his practice as a public speaker," recalls Malcolm Jarvis. X's success in prison debates against scholars from elite institutions increased his confidence and convinced him of the power of such encounters to persuade audiences of the merits of his position.

Malcolm X's mastery of debate resulted not only from his skillful use of tactics and techniques, but, as John Illo has observed, because "the man whose secondary education began painstakingly and privately in the Norfolk Prison Colony was able to analyze for his people their immediate burden, its maintenance in a system of domestic power and its relation to colonialism, more acutely than the white and black Ph.D's with whom he debated" (p. 7). Throughout his public life, Malcolm X maintained a belief in the possibility of personal and social change and in debate as a form of address through which such transformation might best be initiated.

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